

# The Driftwood Garden Diary

with Geoff Stonebanks



Feeding the robins



The hyacinths are highly fragrant



The neatly chopped Butia trunk

## The robins follow me round... it is almost as if they are tame

**W**E'RE into spring at last, but can we rely on some mild weather over the next few weeks? There is plenty to get on with in my garden, preparing for my first visitors, in just nine weeks.

I've got a beautiful *Butia Capitata*, rising almost 20 feet up in the centre of the back garden. It looks very majestic.

The strong winds through the winter months had torn the leaves on many of the outer fronds, so I have given it a quick trim, taking off six that were badly damaged, with the help of my chainsaw.

It is always a risky business, as I'm not too fond of using the saw, for obvious reasons.

Fortunately, there were no mishaps and the palm look so much better.

It was a small palm, in a 4-litre pot, when planted back in 2009 and was a Christmas gift from my mother. It is one of the hardiest feather palms, tolerating temperatures down to minus ten degrees or below.

Curving, silvery blue pinnate leaves give it a stunning, graceful look and its stout single trunk has prominent leaf scars which you can see in the picture.

It is commonly known as the jelly palm, taking its name from the fleshy fruit which are used to make jellies, jam and wine. Some experts say it prefers a sheltered position, that said mine is extremely exposed.

It is also perfect for container growing as the roots can adapt really well to being in a limited space.

You can hear me on BBC Radio Sussex tomorrow morning, Sunday, when I will be joining Joe Talbot on the gardening programme at about 11.40am. Listen in to hear about gardens opening for the National Garden Scheme through the month of April.

The scheme has three gardens to see this weekend in Sussex.

There are two plots to visit on both Saturday and Sunday. Today, over in West Sussex see Down Place in South Harting, near Petersfield between 1.30pm and 5.30pm and in Sheep Street, Etchingham, King

Johns Lodge is open between 11am and 5pm, where you can stroll through the eclectic shop, nursery and enjoy delicious refreshments in their tearoom.

On Sunday, joining Down Place, is 47 Denmans Lane in Lindfield, a beautiful and tranquil one-acre garden, which opens the gate from 1pm to 5pm. Full details and directions can be found on all three at [www.ngs.org.uk](http://www.ngs.org.uk)

We have lots of different birds in the garden throughout the year. I've been putting out bird food for many years now, especially in the winter months, and they clearly know that and sit and wait patiently some mornings until I go out there and top the feeders up.

There are quite a few robins and they seem so tame, almost following me around the garden as I tidy up and move things, in the hope of me displacing some insects or worms for a snack.

Great spring bulbs for the garden at this time of the year are hyacinths.

Renowned for their highly fragrant blooms, these spring bulbs are widely grown as houseplants and in bedding displays in borders and containers.

They're easy and quick to grow, producing large flowerheads in shades of blue, white and pink, as well as deep red, purple and even yellow.

I've got quite a few around the garden both in the ground and in containers like the pretty ones pictured.

Sometimes the flower heads are often so large that they flop over as they develop. If you carefully insert a small cane next into the soil by the bulb and use garden twine to secure the bloom it sometimes helps.

In readiness for the warmer weather, I have been busy sorting through my collection of agave, all of which are stored in the dry, undercover in a side alley.

Regular readers might recall, I lost several in the winter months that I had planted in the ground, as they were so large and difficult to carry.

Last winter was the first time I had done this and being planted on chalk, providing good drainage, I had expected them to survive.



Geoff with the trimmed jelly palm

Sadly, the weather was some of the worst we have seen since we lived here, with so much rain, then the cold, which created the perfect storm for them to rot away getting too wet, then freezing.

Fortunately, I have many more, smaller specimens that can be placed outside again next month. Despite the losses, I reckon I still have over 60 plants in my collection, planted up in a variety of containers.

The hardest part each year is to carry them out from protection and place in among the planting in the beach garden and then put them back under cover in the autumn.

Read more of Geoff's garden at [www.driftwoodbysea.co.uk](http://www.driftwoodbysea.co.uk)



Small agaves